



Before: Judge Nkemdilim Izuako

Registry: Nairobi

Registrar: Abena Kwakye-Berko

WALONKONGA

v.

SECRETARY-GENERAL
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

JUDGMENT

Counsel for the Applicant:
Nicole Washienko, OSLA

Counsel for the Respondent:
Stephen Dietrich, ALS/OHRM
Nicole Wynn, ALS/OHRM

Introduction

1. The Applicant is a former staff member of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). He served at the GS-5 level.
2. On 11 November 2015, he filed an Application contesting the decision not to renew his fixed-term appointment and to separate him from service on the grounds of abolition of his post.
3. The Respondent filed a Reply to the Application on 14 December 2015.
4. The Tribunal, with the consent of the Parties decided, in accordance with art. 16.1 of the Tribunal's Rules of Procedure, that an oral hearing is not required in determining this case and that it will rely on the Parties' pleadings and written submissions.

Facts

5. The Applicant had served in Kinshasa within MONUSCO as a Language Assistant (LA) until his fixed term appointment which ended on 30 June 2015 was not renewed on grounds of abolition of post.
6. Before the said abolition, the United Nations Security Council in its Resolution 2147 (2014)¹, had called on MONUSCO to enhance the flexibility, effectiveness and capacity of the operations of the military force in the implementation of the Mission's mandate. It also pointed to the need for a clear exit strategy.
7. Thereafter, on 26 February 2015, the Secretary-General proposed a budget for MONUSCO for the period from 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016². The said budget, among other things, proposed the abolition of 80 General Service (GS) LA posts.

¹ (Democratic Republic of Congo), adopted on 28 March 2014.

² Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo submitted pursuant to paragraph 39 of Security Council resolution 2147 (2014).

8. Following the Secretary-General's budget proposal to the General Assembly, MONUSCO issued Information Circulars to its entire staff on 6 and 9 March 2015, 14 April 2015, and 20 April 2015, with regard to the proposed budget, the establishment of a Comparative Review Panel (CRP), and the review criteria.

9. Under the proposed new structure for the Mission which was approved by the General Assembly, the military force in Bukavu was to be reduced by one battalion and Kinshasa would no longer be an operational base. As a result, LA posts in Kinshasa and Bukavu were abolished. This meant that a budgetary reduction of 80 LA posts in the 2015/2016 budget cycle for MONUSCO was done.

10. The Applicant, who was an LA in Kinshasa was affected by the abolition. A memorandum from the MONUSCO Director of Mission Support (DMS) informed him of this development. He was also informed through a memorandum from the Chief Civilian Personnel Officer (CCPO), Ms. Xaba-Motsa.

11. As at 16 June 2015, the Applicant, along with the other LAs at the Mission whose posts were at the time proposed for abolishment sent a letter to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for MONUSCO contesting the non-renewal of their fixed-term appointments by reason of abolition of post.

12. On 8 June 2015, Mr. Eric Blanchard Jibikila, who was a member of the Executive Committee of the National Staff Union, sent a request for management evaluation in respect of the then impending abolishment of the 80 LA posts, including the Applicant's post.

13. MEU replied to the designated focal point for the affected Language Assistants on 2 July 2015 and promised to send its decision by 13 August 2015.

14. Meanwhile, on 24 June 2015 the Applicant received a memorandum from MONUSCO's CCPO stating that his fixed-term appointment would not be renewed beyond 30 June 2015 and that accordingly, his separation from the Organization would take effect at the close of business on that same date.

15. Shortly thereafter, the Applicant was offered an Individual Contractor (IC) contract by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) for the position of LA within MONUSCO. This IC contract was for a period of one-month effective 1 July 2015 but was subsequently extended.

Applicant's case

16. The Applicant's case may be summarized as follows:

The recommendation of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly that led to the abolition of the Applicant's post was in violation of the United Nations statutory framework.

a. The Secretary-General's report of 26 February 2015 to the General Assembly regarding the proposed financing arrangements for MONUSCO for the period from 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016 recommended the abolition of 80 LA posts in MONUSCO for the 2015/2016 budget cycle. The said report did not make any reference to reengaging these LAs as ICs.

b. That report was in turn considered by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) which then issued a report to the General Assembly on 1 May 2015 approving the Secretary-General's recommendation for the abolishment of 80 LA posts. As with the report of the Secretary-General, no reference was made to the fact that these 80 LAs would be reengaged as ICs.

c. On the basis of the General Assembly's endorsement, MONUSCO then proceeded to inform the Applicant of the non-renewal of his fixed-term appointment and separation after 30 June 2015. Shortly thereafter, the Applicant was then offered an IC contract.

d. The mere fact that MONUSCO decided to engage the LAs under agreements administered by UNOPS, a United Nations Common System entity, as opposed to directly engaging the individual contractors

themselves does not alter the Organization's obligations under paragraph 3.7 of ST/AI/2013/4.

e. Moreover, the decision to essentially convert the Applicant's fixed-term appointment to an IC contract, administered by UNOPS, was taken while the Applicant was still a staff member of the United Nations Secretariat and thus ST/AI/2013/4 applies to the Applicant.

The non-renewal of the Applicant's fixed-term appointment and his attendant separation were unlawful because no comparative review was conducted.

f. MONUSCO's approved budget for the period of 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016 was that 80 LAs in MONUSCO's Field Administrative Offices be abolished and the remaining 92 LA posts be reassigned to different offices within the Mission.

g. Although the CCPO's memo of 22 May 2015 to the Applicant stated that he had been the subject of a comparative review process in which he was not successful, no comparative review was actually undertaken with respect to him. It was never communicated to the Applicant how the purported comparative review with regard to the 172 LA posts was conducted, or where he ranked in the exercise. The Applicant was never asked to provide the Mission with his PHP and recent e-PASes before the purported comparative review process took place.

h. This apparent lack of a comparative review process further renders the decision not to renew the Applicant's contract and to separate him from service unlawful, as he ought to have been given the opportunity to undergo a comparative review process in order to be considered for the remaining LA posts in the Field Administrative Offices of MONUSCO.

The purported abolition of the Applicant's post was in fact a conversion of his fixed-term contract into an IC contract.

i. The functions of the fixed-term appointment that the Applicant had been encumbering are identical to those of the IC contract that he was offered by UNOPS.

j. By hiring the Applicant on an IC contract following the purported abolition of his post, the Organization enjoys the benefit of obtaining exactly the same services from him that he had previously provided to the Organization under his fixed-term appointment. This state of affairs contravenes the provisions of section 3.7(b) of ST/AI/2013/4 (Consultants and individual contractors).

Unequal treatment of similarly situated staff members

k. Another LA whose post had been abolished was placed against a vacant post in another section and this constitutes unjustifiable and unequal treatment among similarly situated staff members.

Remedies sought

l. Due to his wrongful separation from service, the Applicant has suffered greatly due to lack of job security, loss of the entitlements and benefits he enjoyed as a staff member such as insurance and pension.

m. The Applicant accordingly prays for the award of one year's net base salary for his wrongful separation from the Organization. He also asks for three months' salary as moral damages.

Respondent's case

17. The Respondent's case is summarized below.

Receivability

a. A decision by the General Assembly to abolish a post is not a contestable administrative decision.

b. Pursuant to art. 2.1(a) of the Dispute Tribunal's Statute, the Dispute Tribunal lacks jurisdiction to review the matter of the abolition of the post the Applicant encumbered and the recommendation of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly that led to the abolition of the post. These claims are not receivable and should be rejected.

c. The only reviewable administrative decision before the Dispute Tribunal is the decision not to renew the Applicant's appointment due to the abolition of the post.

Submissions on the Merits

The decision not to renew the Applicant's appointment was lawful as the post he encumbered was subject to a legitimate restructuring of the Mission.

d. A fixed-term appointment does not carry any expectancy of renewal, irrespective of length of service (staff regulation 4.5(c); staff rule 4.13(c)).

e. The Applicant has adduced no evidence that the decision not to renew his fixed-term appointment was unlawful. On 25 June 2015, the General Assembly abolished 80 LA posts to meet the operational and budgetary needs of the Mission. In conjunction with the MONUSCO military force, the MONUSCO Administration identified the LA posts in Bukavu and Kinshasa as the posts to be abolished. This decision was made in accordance with the change in Mission operations as mandated by the Security Council.

f. A proposal to restructure a mission that results in loss of employment for staff members falls within the Secretary-General's discretionary authority.

g. The exercise of the Secretary-General's discretion may only be challenged and reviewed on the grounds that the staff member had a legitimate expectancy of renewal, that the exercise was attended by procedural irregularity, or that the decision was arbitrary or motivated by

improper purposes. The Applicant bears the burden of proving that the discretion not to renew his or her appointment was not validly exercised.

A comparative review was not required and the outsourcing of the LA functions was proper in the circumstances.

h. There was no requirement for the Mission to subject the Applicant and others similarly placed to a comparative review process. The Department of Field Support Downsizing Guidelines provide that locally recruited staff must be comparatively reviewed by duty station. Since all LA posts in the Bukavu and Kinshasa duty stations were abolished, a comparative review was unnecessary.

i. Due to the need for LAs to be more mobile and to effectively interact and liaise with the local population by providing linguistic support during their engagement, it was agreed to engage LAs through individual contractor agreements to be administered by UNOPS.

j. As a result, it was no longer viable to use national General Service posts to provide for LA positions to a force that is highly mobile, that deploys at short notice, and sometimes requires a surge in its numbers for a limited duration. Additionally, there is no suitable allowance for the travel of national staff.

k. MONUSCO decided to outsource the provision of LA functions in response to the recommendation of the Civilian Staffing Review (CSR) report.

l. MONUSCO already outsources a number of services and considers that the outsourcing of language services satisfies the military force's current requirements. Information Circular ST/IC/2005/30 (Outsourcing and impact on staff) issued on 15 June 2005, sets out guidance for programme managers when considering outsourcing.

m. In accordance with that guidance, MONUSCO informed staff representatives that language services would be outsourced and the staff

representatives had an opportunity to respond by engaging in discussions with the National Staff Union representatives under the UNOPS contractual modality.

The Respondent did not violate any provisions of ST/AI/2013/4.

n. The Applicant's claim that the Organization violated section 3.7(b) of ST/AI/2013/4 is inapposite. Section 1.1 of that Administrative Instruction sets out the scope and procedure under which the United Nations Secretariat may directly engage individual consultants and individual contractors for temporary assistance in order to respond quickly, flexibly and effectively to organizational priorities.

o. MONUSCO did not engage LAs under the framework of ST/AI/2013/4. Rather, the Mission decided to engage individual contractors under agreements administered by UNOPS which are governed by the UNOPS Financial Regulations and Rules.

p. Insofar as the Applicant claims that the award of individual contracts by UNOPS violated any rules, such a violation would not render the non-renewal of the Applicant's appointment unlawful. The Applicant was not entitled to be engaged under an individual contract with UNOPS.

q. If indeed the engagement of the Applicant under a UNOPS agreement contravened UNOPS contracting rules as the Applicant claims, the remedy is not monetary compensation for the Applicant, but rather the voiding of the said contract.

Considerations

18. The Tribunal will now consider whether challenge against the non-renewal decision is receivable and whether there is any merit in the Applicant's other claims

19. With regard to the issue of the receivability, the Tribunal agrees with the Respondent's submission of law that the Applicant cannot challenge the abolition

of his post by the General Assembly which by itself is akin to a country's constitution, the higher norm, and the supreme organ of the Organization.

20. By the same token, a decision of the General Assembly is binding on the Secretary-General who has a duty to implement it. The Applicant lacks the capacity to challenge the non-renewal of his appointment in so far as it is properly implemented in consequence of the General Assembly's decision to abolish it.

21. In *Ovcharenko et al*³, it was held that an administrative decision taken as a result of the decisions of the General Assembly is lawful and that the Secretary-General cannot be held accountable for executing such a decision.

22. With regard to the question whether the provisions of section 3.7(b) of ST/AI/2013/4 were contravened by the hiring of the Applicant under an IC contract by UNOPS after the abolition of his post to provide language services to the Mission, the Tribunal finds and holds that the said rules were not contravened.

23. This is because section 3.7(b) does not envisage a situation of post abolishment. The said section contemplates a situation where the post formerly encumbered by a former or retired staff member continues to exist and the separated staff member is reengaged as a consultant or IC to continue to perform the same functions.

24. The mischief that that section seeks to avoid is the continued indirect encumbrance of a post under the guise of a consultancy or individual contract by a staff member who by reason of retirement or other form of separation has left the Organization.

25. In the case of this Applicant, the post he previously encumbered as a Language Assistant had ceased to exist at the time UNOPS offered him the new contract as an IC at the Mission following the abolition of his post. Even if the Mission by itself had reengaged the Applicant as an IC, the Respondent cannot be said to have breached the provisions of section 3.7(b) of ST/AI/2013/4.

³ 2015-UNAT 530.

26. The Applicant in supplementary pleadings raised the issue of about five other LAs in Bukavu and Kinshasa who continued to enjoy fixed-term contracts after all LA posts in these two duty stations were said to have been abolished. He also raised the issue of another former LA who was laterally transferred to an Administrative Assistant post. His argument was that he did not receive equal treatment with these staff members following the abolition of his post.

27. The Respondent in reply explained that the five LAs in question had encumbered borrowed posts from other sections at the time of the abolition of the 80 LA posts in Bukavu and Kinshasa and were therefore not affected by the abolitions. One of them although identified as an LA was actually serving as a Supply Assistant. Their fixed term contracts were later extended to 30 June 2016.

28. With regard to the one other LA who was laterally transferred to a vacant post of Administrative Assistant at the Mission at the time of the abolitions, there is evidence that the Mission had published an Information Circular dated 18 May 2015. In that IC published on MONUSCO's intranet only, those to be affected by the abolitions were invited to apply to other vacant posts at the Mission that matched their profiles. The said LA successfully applied and was laterally transferred to the post of Administrative Assistant.

29. These explanations by the Respondent were not challenged. The Tribunal in these circumstances does not find that unequal treatment occurred in the implementation of the Mission's restructuring which led to the abolition of 80 LA posts in Bukavu and Kinshasa including the Applicant's post.

Conclusions

30. The Tribunal finds that the Applicant's claim regarding the non-renewal of his fixed-term appointment is not receivable. Further, his claims regarding his recruitment under an IC contract by UNOPS and lack of equal treatment have no merit. The Application is accordingly refused.

Case No. UNDT/NBI/2015/168

Judgment No. UNDT/2016/175

(Signed)

Judge Nkemdilim Izuako

Dated this 23rd day of September 2016

Entered in the Register on this 23rd day of September 2016

(Signed)

Abena Kwakye-Berko, Registrar, Nairobi